An Overview of Third Circle Leadership

Human action and choice-making can be roughly divided into three categories self-oriented, social norm-oriented and principle-oriented. Each of those three is rooted in different perspectives on the world and benefit different audiences. The three orientations of moral choice-making and the beneficiaries can be represented effectively as three concentric circles. The increasing area of each circle represents the person’s maturing moral awareness as well as their expanding range of concern for the diverse members of a community.

Picture three teenagers in a local corner store silently and individually considering the same choice, “Should I steal this candy bar?” and all three deciding “No, I won’t steal it.” The first teenager concluded, “I won’t steal it because I don’t want to go to jail.” This is self-oriented reasoning—I don’t want something bad to happen to me. The second teenager thought, “I won’t steal it because I don’t want to disappoint my parents.” This is social norm-oriented reasoning—deferring to norms established by the person’s significant group, often parents, teachers, a boss, or peers. The third teenager decided, “Stealing is wrong. If I owned this store, I would not want anybody to steal from me, so I won’t steal from the owner of this store.” All three made the same decision, but in fact their moral motivations were different.

This teenager’s motivation moved into principle-oriented territory: I won’t do it because it is not fair. This choice reflected attention on how everyone concerned would be affected, including the
Only third-circle, principle-centered thinking and action is capable of advancing the common good – the good of all. One of the most powerful things a leader can do to change the world is to change their mind about the world. In this case it means moving into and taking up root in the third-circle.

How can we know for sure when our choices and actions are moving in the direction of the common good and when they are not? The concept of the third circle offers a means for tethering the common good to real-world practical action in the form of the simple question: “Am I in the third circle?”

Embedded in this simple question are several others:

Are the choices I am making grounded in principle?

In particular, am I attending to justice and to care?

Whose concerns and interests have I diminished or ignored?

What would it mean to re-commit to the good of all concerned?

Asking “Am I in the third circle?” may start out as something to do once a week or once a day. Eventually it may become a deeply engrained, instinctive filter when considering an action. Asking yourself questions such as “Am I really grounded in principle?” “Am I really paying attention to the good of all”, will clarify the intentions behind your choices.

It’s also useful after taking action. Following a key meeting or at the end of the day, you can reflect on your choices and actions. Did they exhibit principled-choice-making as well as concern for all? Which circle were you acting from?

Finally, you can observe yourself not only before and after the fact but also in the moment. You may be engaged with a client and realize that something you just said was not third circle in nature. In that very moment you can take a deep breath, make a choice to enter the principled circle for the good of all, and let the next thing you say be different.

If we consciously stay rooted in the third circle our choices and actions will naturally direct us and those around us towards those choices and actions that will advance the common good.